

Leadership Conference of Women Religious
2024 Annual Assembly – Orlando, Florida
Outstanding Leadership Award Acceptance

“Then who shall we be?”
Nancy Schreck OSF

My understanding of why I am honored with this award relates I think to the work I have been doing among your congregations for the last thirty or so years. This has been a tremendous privilege for me whether in New York or Nigeria, Kentucky or Korea, Baltimore or Brazil. In that work with you I believe that *who we shall be* is becoming clearer. Now this has not been easy work: So, as I receive your gratitude tonight, I want to thank you for pushing me to the edges of my understanding and into deep reflection on many aspects of religious life. Sometimes you asked for a specific topic, other times I was led there by my inner response to the needs you articulated in the invitation offered. Each time you invited me you pushed me into a place of solitude and search, anguish and thoughtful consideration, doubt and hope. For much of the time as I prepared to work with your congregations, I sat in silence waiting to see if words would form in my heart and get to my mouth. That work taught me how to be a keeper of the things that matter and led me step by step into some understanding of how to live in troubled times.

So, for this brief reflection I decided to give back to you what you have given to me with the hope that it will be a help in knowing “*then who shall we be.*” I have seven themes and will offer them in five minutes – so you know this is a vast oversimplification!

Identity: I have been frequently asked to reflect with you on the issue of identity. Who are we – when we peel away all the non-essentials previously defining us. We know that in the ocean of history, things build and are worn away to what is most essential. This is an irrevocable and recurring tide of time. So, in this identity work we are not chasing some truth outside ourselves - we are becoming more and more of who we are in our deepest being. We are discovering and defining ourselves in terms of being contemplative prophetic women. We are claiming our prophet identity because the blood of our foundresses, and the spirit of Jesus flow in our veins. We are people with a soul of steel and a heart that does not conform quietly to the systemic problems of our day. So, we are ready to address the climate crisis, systemic racism, the welcome of immigrants, issues of health and housing. We know as we work with these issues we are always being converted. We know that these issues are not only systemic but spiritual issues because they distort our souls. This is part of why our contemplative life is so critical. In this place we go deep to meet as much reality as we can handle and then more so. It is the place where our sacred self-dwells and where we meet God most honestly, where we are open to revelation, and to wisdom. Then who shall we be? We are and shall be prophetic contemplative women.

We are doing this inner and outer work in a time of exile- when we experience so many things falling apart – not just internally but all around us. And the new we long for is yet an unseen emerging. With Esther: we try to believe that “*perhaps we were born for such a time as this.*” (Esther 4:14) We do this journeying in an environment of darkness - not as an evil thing, but in a

time when we cannot see as we previously did when so much was light. Then who shall we be? Women willing to walk in the darkness, both waiting patiently and acting courageously at the same time. We just brighten like the moon

Transformation: is the name we are giving to what is happening in us in this tumultuous time. Essential to this experience is our need to talk with each other about, what we want, to determine the next threshold we need to step through knowing there will be no finished product. In this work of transformation, we know that our group can be transformed only to the degree that each member is willing to be transformed – so I have experienced us trying to support one another in growth. This is what I know: the contemplative leader, team, and congregation intuits the time for movement. We can't perceive what newness will come but we are ready to trust as we see only a daily supply of breadcrumbs showing the way. Then who shall we be? Women who will stay in liminality for as long as it takes, and then when ready to move - we move!

Community: All of us are also working with the meaning of community and the struggle to know what making this journey together in our time looks like. I have seen your concern for the radical support of each other while all the structures of how we are together are changing. The changes in understanding are helping us focus on what in our deepest essence holds us. We want to find places where we can tell our stories, examine what it means to be together and decide how we will together show kindness to our world.

The fierce urgency of now: Even though we stumble at times, we desire to make a difference in our world. The powerful stories of your foundresses/founders have helped me know that these are not the first turbulent times religious life has been through. Now it is our turn to be brave. In faith we are women who do bold things for God's people in some of the most troubled spots in the world. We are worldwide witnesses who traveled to far countries, to isolated mountain villages, into the rain forest, built a maternity hospital halfway up a mountain. We respond to needs for water and food and schools and even martyrdom. Not only in Salvador, Brazil, and Korea but as close as Mississippi, inner-city Chicago, and Harlem NY.

We have been developing truly international and intercultural skills. Our formative experiences come not only in serving in a variety of countries but also as we welcome and become more truly inclusive of our provinces and people from many places around the world. We really are coming to know ourselves as global citizens and are realizing how incumbent it is to express this citizenship. We are learning so much from each other: in this sense there are three scenes in my work I will never forget. One comes from a young sister in India who said: "Do we want to be stationary or missionary." And a sister in Brazil who reminds us that it doesn't matter that we are smaller, what matters is that we are light. I was once in a motherhouse in Germany which the Nazi army had taken over during WW II. The soldiers painted the exterior black so at night it couldn't be seen. The sisters reclaimed it removing all that paint. We know that the future holds even more challenges. The global nature of the 21st century promises to unfold an unimaginable cultural shift upon the world's landscape. The emerging shift will initiate unprecedented change. Forge immense challenges, fuel boundless opportunity. Then who shall we be? Global citizens.

Hope – I have frequently been called upon to speak about hope, and those invitations usually came when I was personally most despairing. When in my own prayer I would say with the psalmist, “*God, are you asleep?*” And with Isaiah, “*God, are your arms too short to save us?*” (Is. 59) What does hope look like when so much around us is loss? I have come to realize that often life sets us down in the Valley of Dry Bones, in the place where we feel a loss of self, our wells run dry, hope slips away, each time the bones get dryer, and it seems like I can’t stop mourning. And then mysteriously it is from this place life allows me/us to “look boldly and go where others don’t want to tread. And again, I am pushed from within to know that we are always called to continue creating possibilities until our dying breath – and that this is the only way the hope of new life has ever really come. Who then shall we be? Women of hope.

Leadership: I have been very privileged to meet so many powerful loving leaders. With each invitation I could see your deep desire for the ongoing formation of your members. You desire for them to be moved to go forward into an unknown future with resources needed to live in chaotic times. And for you new leaders – whether in year one or twenty-one there is the realization that each time is a new time, and we are called on to discover the nimbleness we have inside us to do things differently. I also have had the privilege of working alongside the many LCWR leadership teams, executive directors and staffs who are some of the finest women I could ever ask to be part of. For me it has been a privilege to stand with countless thousands who do the daily work of service, who possess great skills, and human passion, and who give themselves away in hard circumstances and against great odds

Inter congregational life – religious life is our deepest identity, our charisms the rich colorful expressions of how we live that life. We are growing in solidarity with each other and are going into the future more radically one than we ever could have imagined. This “project” of religious life we are engaged in is very large – bigger than any one of us, and any one of our congregations. So, we are creating something new in the present as we have one eye to the future. The path is not always clear but what is clear is that we must go into the future together. We know we cannot wrestle the future into existence, we can only welcome what comes and be willing to dive into the raging streams of creative energy, watching the unexpected appear. We know that as sure as day follows night, we are required to believe in something that doesn’t exist in order to allow it to come into being. Coming together, exploring perspectives, and pushing aside our falsely held boundaries is the work before us. We are likely to be surprised by what letting go can create. Then who shall we be? Women creating a new future. Women who desire to be fed on what gives us life, what stokes our mission with the fire of passion, and leads us to new and creative ways to bring life

For those who have discerned your concluding, I have been amazed that so many of you do so with a sense of adventure. You remind me of Sojourner Truth who said: *I’m not dying, honey, I’m going home in a blaze of glory.*” Gathered as a congregation on the other side of what we know now I believe we will hear God say, “Well done, well done, well done! You are showing all of us that that there is great purpose in our dying our completion, it is the pattern of the universe, it is the only way new life can begin. Then who shall we be? Women unafraid of what the future holds.

Conclusion:

We are now living in a most demanding and perplexing time, but we have been here before in our ancestors, and they will guide us by the words they have left behind and by their spirit continuing to be with us. Speaking of such I want to close by sharing with you some advice that I believe has made me who I am: In a 1968 interview for entrance into the Dubuque Franciscans the General Superior of the time Matilda Adams said to me: there is no place in religious life for mediocrity. So, I had to take her seriously! Early in my initial formation when members were struggling with the issue of dress, one of my directors said I should always remember that the only habit you need wear is that of putting on Christ. I have been trying to do so all these years. And finally at evening prayer on my first day in the congregation the reading was from Sirach "My child, if you aspire to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal." Well, isn't that our story!

Finally, Elizabeth Carroll, RSM once spoke with our congregation, telling us that whatever we are working with internally is never for ourselves alone – but always so that we have some wisdom to offer our larger world. Isn't that what all this inner work we are doing is all about? We are assisting our fractured, bruised and beautiful world in understanding all these things we have just been talking about because the world critically needs to learn what we are coming to know.

Friedrich Nietzsche said: *"I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things, then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful."* That is my hope - that as I have worked among you, I have been able to make religious life more beautiful.

Thank you thank you thank you: you have shown me what it is to be faithful and because we are faithful, we are not afraid. This is who we are, and for this I am very grateful.